

Signe Ralkov

Hold still

30 October – 28 November 2025

In *Hold still*, Signe Ralkov moves among sites where history has been claimed, staged, or repaired. Through photographs and silverpoint drawings she attends to bodies, residues, and repetitions across time - testaments to an imagined past even after it has slipped out of narrative control. "Hold still" carries a familiar tenderness: something a mother might say while smoothing a child's hair, or words spoken just before a kiss. A phrase for catching what is about to move. At the same time, it echoes the pathos of the photograph: that small, melancholic command to stop time, but here, with a slight irony, aware of its own futility (its own cliché).

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In the mid-19th century, King Frederik VII toured the nation on a white parade horse so admired that, when the horse died in 1864, the royal household had it preserved for posterity. It stands today - sutured, lacquered, taxidermied - in a glass box at the Museum of the Royal Stables.

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Photography is often said to wound the world by turning present into past in the instant of a touch of a finger; the image says of its subject this has been and thus this is no longer. (The faint reflection of a sunlit window, a hazy flickering light: something like a veil that protects its subject from total assimilation into the pathos of the image).

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A grey horse's fur lightens with age, gradually making it take on a more statue-like quality. Perlen was born all white, and it was Frederik VII's favourite horse for this reason. Its pale fur shimmered with such a pearlescent sheen, that Frederik felt like an equestrian marble statue come to life whenever he rode it across the nation. He really wanted to be popular.

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Horse Sacrifice (500 BCE–800 CE) stages an Iron Age rite for which no camera existed; *Hodde Kiln* stands as an authorised guess as to what came before the artefact that remained. These sites arrive after the fact yet behave as if they precede it: they assign an image to what left no image, they lend narrative skin to skeletal knowledge. Their sincerity is inseparable from their anachronism, a kind of speculative claim to a past.

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Taxidermy does not mourn, it performs: Perlen as *car*, trophy – as mannequin in the window of a saddler's shop. On 6 July 1898, Perlen was sold at auction. Listed in the notice along with it was a large American safe, cigarettes, and 13 brightly coloured silk dresses. For an unknown period, a wax sculpture of Frederik VII sat on its back. At the age of 82 it was donated to the Historical Museum of Aalborg by the saddler as he wanted to focus his work on padding and upholstery and no longer needed it. It must have been around this time, when desire-laden glances exchanged through the shop window gave way to the dry, fallen ones at the museum, that it sloughed off its ears and fore-hooves. To end not in battle nor flanked by cigarettes and silk dresses but among bullet-point labels and polite lightning, condemned to an eternity as historical document. One almost senses its boredom at having reached this destination: It hopes that its portrait can at least be purchased as a postcard or on a tote bag at the front desk.

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Four silver-point etchings lifted from conservation footage of the horse's 2016 restoration record a slow choreography of administrative aftercare. Rituals of secular embalming. If it's

chemically treated muzzle were to speak, I think it would quote Barthes:

“I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a spectre ... what I see is that I have become Total-Image, which is to say, Death in person.”

Someone responds by caressing the suture-line around its reconstructed ear with a plastic gloved hand and gently adjusts its hove. Silverpoint is itself a medium that yields to gradual change: metal dragged across paper, oxidising and darkening over time. Image and method perform the same thesis: 150 years of dust makes a white horse go dark.

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Reconstruction rehearses the fiction that form can survive content. Photography rehearses the fiction that time can be kept from dispersal. One preserves the world after life, the other preserves it before loss, yet both enact the same verb: to hold. Here time is not arrested to celebrate a historical presence, nor does it attest that what is left behind refers to inherent absences. A refracted, scratched, uncertain moment that occurs before either claim can be made. Perhaps this is what tenderness looks like when history is out of breath.

— Helena Steffensen